



Review of Carey, John, Murray, Kevin & Ó Dochtartaigh, Caitríona (ed.): Sacred Histories. A Festschrift for Máire Herbert. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2015. xxv, 423 S. ISBN 978-1-84682-564-4

Fomin, M. (2018). Review of Carey, John, Murray, Kevin & Ó Dochtartaigh, Caitríona (ed.): Sacred Histories. A Festschrift for Máire Herbert. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2015. xxv, 423 S. ISBN 978-1-84682-564-4. *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*, 63(1), 452-8. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zcph-2017-0011>

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

Published in:
Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie

Publication Status:
Published (in print/issue): 25/01/2018

DOI:
[10.1515/zcph-2017-0011](https://doi.org/10.1515/zcph-2017-0011)

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

General rights
Copyright for the publications made accessible via Ulster University's Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy
The Research Portal is Ulster University's institutional repository that provides access to Ulster's research outputs. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact pure-support@ulster.ac.uk.

CAREY, John, MURRAY, Kevin & Ó DOCHTARTAIGH, Caitríona (ed.): *Sacred Histories. A Festschrift for Máire Herbert*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2015. xxv, 423 S. ISBN 978-1-84682-564-4. € 55.

It is a singular honour to be given an opportunity to review the collection of essays presented to Prof. Máire Herbert, Former Head of the Department of Early and Medieval Irish at University College Cork, who, throughout her illustrious career, has inspired many scholars to delve into the fascinating world of saints and scholars of Ireland. The book was officially launched on 06 November 2015 by a former colleague, Professor Patricia Coughlan, at Aula Maxima, UCC.

The collection presents an accolade of scholarship that grew with the collaboration of and under an unstinting guidance from Máire Herbert during her years at UCC, encompassing her colleagues and former students old and young, native and foreign, who all generously shared their knowledge, having expressed their respect in a manner appropriate for the academia.

The volume includes thirty-three contributions (an auspicious number for a book, primarily dealing with various aspects of Christianity), as well as the bibliography of M. Herbert's works, a list of abbreviations, a preface by the editors, and a list of contributors. The volume concludes with a five-page *tabula gratulatoria*, which indicates Máire Herbert's wide-ranging network of friends, former students and colleagues across the globe.

The most important overarching theme of the volume is that of Irish hagiography, in its connection with genealogy, history, onomastics, and prosopography. Evidently, studies of Columba, the subject very close to M. Herbert's heart, take an important place. J. O'Reilly examines an episode from Adamnán's *Vita Columbae* (i, 3) that describes Columba's arrival to Clonmacnoise in the light of the exegetical, hagiographic and monastic traditions with which Adamnán was familiar, whereas K. Ritari takes on the story of Librán from the *Vita* (ii, 39) treating him "as a paragon of conversion to true Christianity" (p. 391). B. Lambkin re-examines the evidence provided by Maghnus Ó Domhnaill in *Betha Colaim Cille* for the ritual of migrant departure. The migration procedure is given extensive treatment, and the hypothesis is proposed that Maghnus "had in mind the departure of his own father, Aodh Dubh, on pilgrimage to Rome in 1510" (p. 187), and that he regarded this as a re-enactment of Colum Cille's departure from Glais an Indluidh, or Glesinenloe harbour, on the Foyle. The departure was carried out under the supervision of an unnamed official bearing a *lorg bengánach* ('forked staff') that played, according to the author, an important part in the ritual. Another important object associated with saints in Ireland, here studied by P. Ní Chatháin, is the monastic bell that plays a prominent role in the practice of ritual malediction. An overview of bells' names together with eleven micro-studies of individual objects connected with different saints is presented.

Beyond Columba, K. Muhr pays attention to earlier cults of other Ulster saints, including St Trea of Artrea, St Colmán Muccaid of Arboe, St Mag Lág

of Drumglass, Sts Guaire of Aghadowey, and, finally, St Lúrach of Maghera. The importance of the latter for the local tradition is studied by looking at the Mid-Ulster place-name tradition, as well as the wells dedicated to the saint and other landmarks. T. Ó Cathasaigh examines a genealogical preamble of the *Vita Sancti Declani* in his study of St Déclán of Ardmore, “with a view to understanding the ways in which Déclán’s biographer uses it to glorify his subject” (p. 292). Genealogy is also the focus of D. Brown’s contribution on *Cethri prímchenéla Dáil Ríata*, “a snapshot of the kingdom of Dál Ríata through the eyes of an informed contemporary” (p. 72), who argues for c. 730/733 as the likely date of composition of the source. G. Mac Eoin focuses on the genealogy of Maol Muire (†1106), one of the three scribes of the Book of the Dun Cow, and traces his pedigree through his father Célechair (†1134) and great-grandfather Conn na mBocht (†1059) to the Mughdhornas of Co. Monaghan. T. Charles-Edwards combines history, genealogy, hagiography, onomastics, law texts and palaeography in his study of Recension I of *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, aiming “to discover the approximate period into which the text fits most comfortably” (p. 86). There are a number of important conclusions to be learned from this paper: firstly, the compilation of Recension I falls into the period when “the Ulstermen declined in power” and the high-kingship of Ireland “was confined to one people, the Féni, and one great family of dynasties, Uí Néill” (p. 87). Secondly, Charles-Edwards proposed to look at the Ulster cycle “as an Ulster-Connaught Cycle”, since the cycle “has a significant Connaught component” (p. 88). Thirdly, he provides convincing evidence that the *Táin* itself had an elevated status in the eyes of the monastic compilers – “considered worthy of learned annotation almost from the beginning of its written transmission” (p. 89). Charles-Edwards dates the sources of Recension I back to the seventh century (p. 90), which is confirmed by the historic (*Annals of Ulster*) and onomastic record. The recension itself, according to the evidence of Muirchú’s *Life of Patrick* and the *Tripartite Life of St. Patrick*, is dated by the scholar to “no earlier than the second half of the eighth century” (p. 92). This date is important, since it helps to assess the likely impact of the *Táin* on contemporaries, and the subsequent evolution of the text.

C. Ó Dochartaigh provides an detailed study of St Thecla’s veneration in Ireland. According to the author, despite condemnation in the works of Origen, Tertullian, Eusebius and others, the apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla* “was already well-established in certain circles by the end of the second century AD” (p. 311), its Latin version “was known in fourth-century Northern Italy” (p. 317), and references to the saint are found in the works of Aldhelm and Bede. In Ireland, “Thecla of Iconium was a considerable figure in the original early ninth-century text of *Félire Óengusso*” (p. 321). Her mention in the late tenth-century *Saltair na Rann* (poem 138) strengthens the argument, “demonstrating that she was commemorated as something more than a saint” (p. 332).

Ó Dochartaigh’s study links in with another significant theme of the volume that can be broadly described as studies in Irish monasticism, where the contacts and mutual exchanges between Christian Ireland and other lands and

traditions play a key role. In this vein, P. Ó Riain studies the onomastic and prosopographic element in the Life of St Cataldo of Taranto, identifying “a reasonably good acquaintance on the part of the author with Ireland” (p. 360), although, most probably, of a second-hand nature. Ó Riain argues that such elements were not readily borrowed; he is more inclined to admit that the section where they appear “presupposes some form of direct Irish influence” (p. 361), which the author explains through contact, “involving high prelates of both Irish and Tarantese origin” (p. 362). St Malachy and Christian Úa Conairche visited Clairvaux in France in 1140 and 1148, where they most likely met Philip, an ex-archbishop of Taranto, and since 1150, a prior of Clairvaux until 1156.

M. Mac Conmara’s contribution evolves from a major research initiative *De initiis* (launched at the 2012 Robert T. Farrell Lecture at Kalamazoo), that deals with the beginnings of Irish monastic learning in 600–800 AD. Attention is paid to the apocryphal sources (*The Irish Gospel of Thomas*, the early Irish text of *The Virgin Mary Dormition and Assumption*, and *The Infancy Gospel*), as well as to the commentaries and glosses on the Psalms, and the Cambridge apocalypse commentary. M. Mac Craith focuses on the veil of Veronica, one of the four precious relics of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, on a fascinating journey through centuries and authors: the story of St Veronica, a woman who offered a cloth to Jesus so that he could wipe his face on his road to crucifixion, became well-known in the West due to the 14th c. work *Meditationes vitae Christianae*. The latter is the source of the veil’s description in the work of Tadhg Ó Cianáin, ‘The journey of the Ulster chiefs from Ireland’ (*Turas na dtaoiseach nUltach as Éirinn*), who provides both the saint and the veil with the name Veronica (p. 213). Mac Craith then goes on to find out about various authors who mentioned the veil of Veronica in their works, such as Giraldus Cambrensis, Peadar Mallius, Dante, Petrarch, Chaucer, Montaigne. He also discusses various theories as to how the veil was brought to Rome where Ó Cianáin arrived in 1608.

P. Sims-Williams explores an attractive hypothesis advanced by J. Bisagni (2012) that “leprechauns take their name from the Luperci, bands of aristocratic youths who ran semi-naked through ancient Rome during the festival of Lupercalia on the 15 February” (p. 409). In Sims-Williams’s view, the key to an Irish misunderstanding are two passages from St Augustine’s *De civitate Dei* (xviii, 17; xviii, 10) which provided Irish scholars with the term **luperc(án)* as a learned cognate of “the native *abac* ‘water sprite’, a being equated with the leprechaun in the earliest Irish texts” (p. 416). That medieval Irish scholars were occupied with finding cognates of native characters in the heroes of Classical tradition, is evident in the discussion by M. Ní Mhaonaigh who sets the figure of Hector and his native analogue Conall Cernach against the interpretative background of the Irish foundation history narratives (*Táin Bó Cuailnge* and *Cath Ruis na Ríg*) coupled with the Irish version of the Roman origin myth, *Togail Troí*. Turning her attention to the twelfth-century poem *Clann Ollaman úaisle Emna* with its “more sustained comparison of the warriors of Troy with the Ulaid” (p. 258), Ní Mhaonaigh demonstrates that the interest of its author lay

in the promulgation of Eochaid mac Duinnshléibhe, the contemporary ruler of the Ulaid, as Ireland's Hector, in contrast to the attempts of the author of the *Mórthimchell Érenn uile* composition of roughly the same date, which upheld Eochaid's nemesis, Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn, by glorifying his tenth-century namesake and predecessor, "Muirchertach mac Néill [who] is termed 'Hector of the Western World' in his annalistic obit of 943" (p. 266).

The influence of the Irish composition *Tochmarc Becfhola* on the compilation of Marie de France's lay *Yonec* is given extensive treatment by J. Carey. He surveys the previous scholarship on *Yonec*, and lists various parallels that exist in the Irish narrative (e.g. *Tochmarc Étaíne*, *Scéla Éógain 7 Cormaic*) and folklore (esp. Irish examples of type ATU 432 'The prince as bird') traditions. On the basis of the hypothesis that the tale's "most likely place of composition" (P. SIMS-WILLIAMS 2011: 232) was Devenish, Carey proposes: "the toponymy of *Yonec* is Welsh; might Marie have derived the latter part of her plot from a Welsh version of *Tochmarc Becfhola*?" (p. 83). The connection which may have existed between the Irish and the Welsh traditions and its relation to the question of the "dating for *Branwen*, and consequently for the compilation of the *Mabinogi* as a whole" (p. 247) is explored by K. Murray in view of a medieval Irish legal practice *dul i tech* 'entering another's house' as a form of submission registered in both the Welsh source and already in the late Old Irish law tract on *cró* and *díbad*.

Further studies of the medieval Irish legal institutions include contributions by E. Bhreathnach and F. Kelly. Kelly focuses on a legal problem "in dealing with crimes for which there is no eye-witness" (p. 175). Early Irish law provides seventeen signs to determine the suspect's guilt in such instance. Kelly provides an edition, translation and a commentary of a legal passage that examines the fifteenth of the seventeen situations that "involves the dishonest taking of an oath" (p. 180) by a person called *mindach méith*, which Kelly translates as 'a smooth swearer'. Bhreathnach discusses a non-contemporary memorandum contained on "the last folio of the early gospel book known as the Book of Durrow" and a tradition of retrospective legal records in Ireland. She then applies the methodology of the University of Toronto DEEDS project (GERVERS and MARGOLIN 2013) to unlock the significance of the memorandum, by paying attention to grantee and property particulars as well as to the witness clause that lists the sureties; "what can be seen in the Book of Durrow memorandum is a fragmentary reflection of the activities and processes of a sophisticated administrative elite who operated in the major churches of pre-Norman Ireland" (p. 21). Wisdom-texts (*tecosca*), which are regarded "as an extension of the legal canon" (KELLY 2003: 17), are the subject of an extensive study by P. Ó Macháin on 'The abiding and all-embracing theme of wisdom in Irish literature' ('*Buaine agus ilghnéitheacht na gaoise i litríocht na Gaeilge*'). Taking a variety of forms, such as "a dialogue, an enquiry, a riddle, a sermon, a prophecy, a triad or a heptad, pure instruction, aphorism and a proverb" ("*an t-agallamh, an ceistiú, an tomhas, an tseanmhóir, an fháistine, an tré nó an seachta, an teagasc lom, an aforaise*

agus an seanfhocal", p. 334), wisdom literature infiltrates various genres of Irish literature, both native and foreign, and occupies its prominent place in various important manuscripts as early as the twelfth century. Wisdom compositions are found in the form of an advice from a father to his son in Irish poetry of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird and Tadhg mac Dáire Mac Bhruaideadha of the Irish bardic schools succeeded in weaving the *dicta* of the earlier *tecosca* (used as a rhetorical device) into the fabric of the poems addressed to their patrons, an approach evident in Irish poetry up to the eighteenth century. Ó Macháin surveys both native wisdom compositions and adaptations of foreign originals, found in various manuscripts of different ages and sizes: 'Conversation between Finn and Ailbhe' (NLI G 1304), *Disticha Catonis* (RIA 37, 217–26), Irish translations of the medieval Latin *florilegia* (e.g. *Liber scintillarum*), as well as quotes from Seneca, Augustin, and Thomas Aquinas found in the *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum* (RIA 476 (23 O 48), 36v–37r), the eighteenth century *Eólas ar an domhain* arranged as a dialogue between a father and his son by Tadhg Ó Neachtain, and, finally, the twentieth century *Cainnt an tsean-shaoghail* (1942) and *Cúrsaí an tsean-shaoghail* (1948) by the philosopher Arland Ussher and *Gearrscoil* (1960) by Seán Ó Ciarghusa, set in the form of a dialogue between a teacher ('*an tOllamh*') and a student ('*garsún*'). In the final section of the paper, Ó Macháin focuses on a short wisdom-text 'Housekeeping' ('*Fearus tighe*') which is concerned with domestic and agricultural economy, penned down for the first time by Eoghan Ruadh Ó Suilleabháin in 1773 (UCC 124, 23–4) and also found in twelve other manuscripts. The text's edition and translation completes Ó Macháin's inquiry.

Questions of textual compilation and the re-adjustment of earlier sources in accordance with new historical and political realities are dealt with by C. Downey who focuses on the twelfth-century saga *Aided Muirchertaig Meic Erca* and follows its evolution in the hands of the late fourteenth century scribe. Murchadh Ó Cuindlis (who was involved in the saga compilation in 1398–9) "seemed often to have sought to improve and correct his exemplars" (p. 127). Another scribal contribution was "the abundance of marginalia" (p. 128): Ó Cuindlis added over ninety verse pieces in the margins, demonstrating his interest in poetry "for how it can enhance and complement a literary, learning or reading experience" (p. 129).

This brings us to the last overarching theme of the volume – Irish poetry, coming down to us in its various expressions and composed at different periods. One does not need to be surprised at the choice of the topic for Prof. Herbert's *Festschrift*: not only did she complete her MA thesis on the subject (HERBERT 1970) – for many years, one of the most popular courses of Máire at the Department was a module in 'Early Irish Poetry'. K. Simms, who informs the reader of the former circumstance in M. Herbert's career, focuses on RIA MS 466 (C iv 2), "a miscellany of medical and magical material" (p. 401), disentangling the political and historical circumstances of their composition in the years 1545–8. Particular attention is given to "a set of verses attributed to returned spirits of

the dead" (p. 401) that appears on folio IV; Simms provides a transcription and translation, together with an attempt to establish their possible authorship. A. Bergholm, a former student of Máire's, focuses on the theme of keening in the mid-eighth century verses of Blathmac, and especially on the devotional nature of the poems, "arguing that despite having been criticised for 'the distorting simplicity of the poet's account'..., [they] communicate a deep and intimate reflection of fundamental theological ideas" (p. 3). Bergholm scrutinises Blathmac's skilful employment "of the native keen skill to interweave the everyday reality of human bereavement into a Christological vision of God's redemptive sacrifice" (p. 13). Blathmac's work is echoed by the work of another outstanding Irish poet, Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh, who equally attempted "to help his fellow countrymen to understand their relationship with God (*foludh*) as well as Christ's passion and sacrifice (*sochar*)" (p. 283). E. Nic Cárthaigh provides an edition and translation of Ó Dálaigh's poem '*Tús na heagna omhan Dé*' which is accompanied by her discussion of the poem's manuscript tradition, its Biblical background, a discussion of the metre and an illuminating examination of the text itself.

E. Boyle and L. Breatnach study the cult of St Patrick in the twelfth century by contributing an edition, translation and analysis of the late Middle Irish poem *Senchas Gall Átha Cliath* ('History of the foreigners of Dublin'). P.A. Breatnach discusses the eighteenth-century Irish women poets in his contribution 'Comhar na mban', whereas P. Coughlan contributes to our understanding of a contemporary Irish female poet Máire Mhac an tSaoi, paying attention to the poet's "exceptional vividness and poignancy" (p. 106) in describing the antinomies of human existence: feelings of troubled human embodiment, "an abiding sense of loss" (p. 112), experiences of bliss through bodily and emotional union, and, on the contrary, "meditation on the transience of sexual passion" (p. 113) and renouncing of physical love. The topic of chastity as "an abstention from sexual concourse" (p. 375) is central to the paper by L. Oliver (†) and A. Adolph, who discuss the semantic development of the Old English term *meowle*.

Employing Prof. Herbert's approach to early Irish hagiography "that sacred literature does not stand aloof from other literatures of its time" (p. 139), J. Flahive explores the use of hagiographical style in secular literature of *fianaigheacht*. His edition of the so-called 'relic lay' on Fionn's shield *Uchán a sciath mo rígh réigh* provides a case-study of "an extended in-tale, introduced by the recovery or presentation of an object of particular importance to Fionn..., its ecphrasis, and the narration of its history and the mighty deeds associated with it" (p.140).

M. Griffin-Wilson deals with "the previously unedited bardic poem, *Teallach coisreagtha críoch Bharrach*, 'The land of the Barrys is a blessed homestead', composed for Dáibhidh mac Séamais (mac Risteard) de Barra (†10 April, 1617)" (p. 161). The style of the poem is *crossántacht*, its primary topic being 'the sovereign's truth' (*fir flaithemon*) and the fecundity of the land as the result of

Dáibhidh's rule. The fertile state of his kingdom is also due to the blessing of St. Patrick, and, finally, the poem is concluded by "a rare bardic apologue about the Classical figure Antaeus son of Terra" (p. 162) that points to the poet's acquaintance with the medieval Irish tale *In Cath Catharda*. Griffin-Wilson argues that the poet selects and juxtaposes motifs of the saint's blessings, of the fortunes of the righteous rule, and of the story of Antaeus, "who was born from the earth and renewed his strength by touching his body to the earth" (p. 162), in order to praise Barrymore and its ruling lord. P. De Brún discusses a song 'Whatever king would reign' (*Pé rí bheas i gcoróin*), composed in Rattoo (Ráth Tuaidh), Máire Herbert's native parish, and preserved in RIA 432 (23 B 4). According to Micheál Ó Séaghdha's publication in *Lóchrann* (April–May 1908), the song was composed in honour of one William Townsend Gun by a poet Seán Caoch Ó Cearbhaill on the latter's visit to the Gun family. An alternative version about the occasion of the song's composition was recorded by Máire Herbert's father, Éamonn Herbert, OS (†1981), in which "one verse said that whatever King would reign there would be a Gun in Rattoo" (p. 120), thus making a reference to Prince Charles (1720–88). According to De Brún, it was most likely that Seán Ó Cearbhaill died in 1848, although the song had an 18th c. flavour to it. Incidentally, two 18th c. poems from East Cork on the topic of the 1739 great frost (and famine that followed) composed by Séamas Beag Mac Coitir are edited here by B. Ó Conchúir.

The volume opens with S. Hutton's poem 'It is in elegant Harrogate I met with the esteemed scion of our resurrection' (*I Harrogate an ghalántais a bhuail mé le planda measúil ár n-aiséirí*) dedicated to Prof. Herbert. The poem is "concerned with a person who 'one day went astray into the Celtic twilight'" (*baineann sé le duine 'chuaigh ar seachrán tráth sa Chamhaoir Cheilteach'*", p. 1). Everyone who reads the poem feels the great debt we owe to Máire: she led us "astray" into the world of Celtic Studies, giving inspirational talks and publishing thought-provoking papers, and many of us stayed there, totally enchanted and in need of further exploration and enquiry.

BISAGNI, Jacopo 2012: 'Leprechaun: a new etymology', *CMCS* 64 (Winter), 47–84.

???

GERVERS, Michael, and MARGOLIN, Michael 2013: 'Application of computerised analyses in dating procedures of medieval charters'. In: <http://res.deeds.utoronto.ca:49838/research/index.asp>, accessed 9 June 2013.

KELLY, Fergus 2003: 'Thinking in threes: the triad in Early Irish literature', *PBA* 125, 1–18.

HERBERT, Máire 1970: *Duanairé Choluim Cille i Laud 615: an téacs*. Unpublished MA thesis, NUI Galway.

SIMS-WILLIAMS, Patrick 2011: ‘*Tochmarc Becfhola*: A “peculiar confused tale?”’.
In: John F. Eska (ed.) *Narrative in Celtic Tradition*, Colgate, NY, 228–34.

Ulster University
m.fomin@ulster.ac.uk

Maxim FOMIN